

Informal learning at CU Boulder's museums and the impact on student experience: Now and for the future

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Introduction

When considered along with the formal curriculum, the nonformal learning opportunities on campus and the informal learning spaces comprise a diverse learning landscape. The value of this complex learning environment for CU students should not be underestimated. In fact, the informal learning aspect of this landscape continues to grow as the participatory culture created by the internet expands—especially for the new generation of students on campus.

For this paper, the CU Art Museum and CU Museum of Natural History will discuss:

- How their staffs embrace their roles as informal learning providers
- How their efforts shape the student experience
- What awareness of the value of informal learning suggests in terms of future research and innovation at CU Boulder

Defining informal learning

Informal learning is often defined by what it is not—formal learning—and that results in a definition so broad that it is of little help to us as we attempt to map the full learning experience of students at CU Boulder. Therefore, a brief definition of formal, nonformal, and informal learning is helpful. Formal learning occurs within an organized and structured context and leads to recognition in some form, such as a diploma or certificate. Nonformal learning encompasses activities to intentionally acquire new knowledge or skills that are not part of a formal curriculum, such as fitness classes at the Student Recreation Center, drop-in workshops at the Museum of Natural History and Feel Good Friday meditation programs at the Art Museum.

Informal learning is defined as learning that is outside of the formal curriculum and the non-formal system of activity. Informal learning activities are characterized by discovery, exploration, and self-directed research (Watkins and Kuglitsch 2015). CU Boulder has an impressive number of places where informal learning can take place, including the Art Museum, the Museum of Natural History, the Heritage Center, Fiske Planetarium, and the University Libraries, to name a few. In addition, informal learning opportunities abound across the campus in numerous ways from tabling events at the University Memorial Center to displays of art in the Laughing Goat coffee shop in Norlin Library.

Students are sometimes directed to these informal learning opportunities on campus as part of a course. But, like visitors to museums in the public at large, they also avail themselves of these informal learning spaces to satisfy their own needs and interests, whether those needs are intellectual, social, cultural or some combination of these (Falk and Dierking 2013). CU's informal learning spaces are primed to help meet these needs at a time when those seeking out cultural experiences increasingly identify their motivations as more than simply 'educational'. A recent nationwide study of cultural

participation revealed that more and more culture-goers are citing their visit as a form of stress release, prompting the study's authors to suggest:

“(…) In a world of constant overstimulation and decreasing boundaries between one's work and personal lives, culture serves as a crucial antidote. Addressing audiences' increasing stress levels doesn't mean the same for every organization: it can mean welcoming and attentive hospitality, comfortable places to sit or gather, or content that is easily accessible.” (Cohen 2017)

Current Strategies

The generation now entering college en masse is Generation Z. Members of this generation, born after 1997, are known as the true 'digital natives'. This generation has immersed themselves in the bounty of the information age, learning both abstract ideas and concrete tasks alike from online sources like Google and YouTube. However, research is revealing that this generation, despite its digital savvy, deeply values in-person communications and interactions (Patel 2017). This presents an opportunity for CU museums to cater to these preferences by creating casual, social spaces where students can gather to explore creative activities, engage in meaning making, and pursue their own interests at their own pace.

In 2017, the Art Museum partnered with University Libraries to launch their yearlong celebration of the 200th anniversary of *Frankenstein*. For one evening in October, nearly 150 student visitors experienced: a playlist of *Frankenstein*-inspired music curated by student DJs at Radio1190, historic volumes from special collections and archives alongside artwork from the museum's collection, exhibition tours and hands-on activities based on the *Frankenstein* theme. At their own pace, students navigated through numerous free-choice informal learning opportunities. Students also interacted with others who shared common interests, but different backgrounds; an informal tally found students from the arts and humanities, hard sciences, and social sciences and ranged from first year undergraduate students to PhD students. This program highlights the Art Museum's interest in creating participatory experiences to promote informal learning in our spaces.

Since 2015, the Art Museum has emphasized participatory elements in the development and design of many of its exhibitions. For example, visitors were invited to recite their favorite lines on a stage built in the gallery as a part of the *Shakespeare at CU* exhibition, and contribute their thoughts on what 'home' meant to them on a response wall in the *Home: American Photography at the CU Art Museum*. In February 2017, the Art Museum explored visitor participation and informal learning further with the launch of our *FlexSpace* programming space. After conducting formative evaluations and focus groups with students on upcoming exhibition content, Art Museum staff converted a 2,100 square foot gallery into a space to encourage exploration of exhibition content through tactile elements including building physical structures, drawing, and writing. The atmosphere was casual, one corner recreating a 1960's living room depicted in a photograph included in the adjoining *Home* exhibition. Programming within the space ranged widely, providing numerous points of entry to the content. It included: a

production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by the Department of Theatre and Dance which explored complementary content to the Art Museum's exhibition *Bawdy Bodies: Satires of Unruly Women*; in-gallery paired conversations with experts from divergent disciplines interpreting content from their perspectives; an International Women's Day Wikipedia edit-a-thon for women artists whose work is included in the Art Museum's collection. Through the shift in emphasis to visitor participation, and staff embracing their roles of informal learning providers, the Art Museum continues to create opportunities for students to engage with, and explore, complex content in informal ways.

The CU Museum of Natural History created the Biolounge in 2007. This innovation to the traditional Biology Hall provides comfortable seating, plenty of electric outlets, and free coffee and tea service amid a variety of exhibits in a 2,000 square foot gallery. On any given weekday in the academic year, students may be found in the Biolounge studying as individuals or engaging in small group conversation. The atmosphere is interesting and convivial. The exhibits, loosely themed around the topic of biodiversity, provide a welcome break from studying. The Biolounge aspires to be a "cabinet of curiosity" that promotes interest in the natural world and encourages people to consider their place in nature. Drop in workshops on a variety of topics, such as botanic illustration, are scheduled two times per semester. But it is the potential of the Biolounge for informal learning that is of interest to the Museum staff.

Future plans for the Biolounge include two scheduled, but informal programs to engage students in the co-creation of exhibits. This deeper engagement with students is part of the Museum's goal to be a dynamic space in which change is a constant. But, involving students in the co-creation of exhibits also meets the desires of this generation of college students for personal interaction and communication. They can be participants in the Museum, not simply observers. And by participating, they not only gain a deeper understanding of the natural world, they increase their self-knowledge, practice valuable skills, and find a place to belong on a large campus.

For the Future

Today's students will become tomorrow's museum goers, advocates for informal arts and culture experiences, and cultural leaders, but only if we successfully engage them at this stage in their lives. Recent studies, including *Culture Track '17*, show that positive early experiences with arts and culture, such as visiting museums, are a clear indicator for future support for arts and culture programs and institutions. Already, this generation is proving eager to advocate for causes in which they find value through personal connections (Bresman 2015 and Zarra 2017). The CU museums have an opportunity to positively impact scores of future advocates, and in doing so, help to fulfill the Chancellor's strategic imperatives 1 and 3: *Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders* and *Positively Impact Humanity*. These current students—future entrepreneurs, researchers, and academics—will be vital in support and advocacy for arts and culture in the coming years.

Beyond the benefit to the museum world and society as a whole, however, there is the potential for engaging in informal learning to benefit students by preparing them to be “life-long, life-wide, life-deep” learners. Most of the learning that occurs across the life span takes place in informal environments. From the earliest experiences of play and physical activity to the development of beliefs, values, and ideologies, all learners need multiple sources of support from a variety of institutions to promote their personal and intellectual development (Banks, et al 2007).

Going further

Informal learning spaces are influencing the student experience in myriad ways, only some of which we have evidence to support. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students value the relationship they develop with the campus museums over the course of their academic career. Research in informal learning suggests that the campus informal learning spaces also allow students to explore identity and knowledge. With additional awareness and university support, the CU Museums could continue to investigate the importance of these informal learning opportunities in affecting student experience and aiding in shaping tomorrow’s leaders.

Consideration of the presence and value of informal learning as part of the CU Boulder student experience suggest several questions:

- What does the full learning ecosystem, of formal, informal and nonformal learning, look like on campus? How do we get a clearer picture?
- How do students find out about what’s out there?
- How can informal learning promote creative thinking and support the acquisition of the 21st century skills of creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking?

The CU Museums urge the Academic Futures committee to consider the informal learning spaces on campus as ideal locations for—and their staffs as instigators of—interdisciplinary research projects. For example, the Museum of Natural History recently submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation Advancing Informal Science Learning funding opportunity titled, *Collaborating Across Disciplines to Address Complex Topics*. The project, proposed by Principal Investigator (PI) Sharon Tinianow and Co-PI’s Jessica Brunecky, Deborah Hollis (University Libraries) and Joseph Polman (School of Education), would study how art museums, science museums, and university libraries can collaborate to create interdisciplinary experiences about climate change specifically for the college student audience outside of the formal curriculum in which they are engaged. Additional investigation into how students are utilizing informal learning as a part of their overall educational experience would provide valuable information for campus museums and libraries to use in collaborative program development, joint marketing, and future exhibitions. Additional funding from the university for staff-driven research projects will allow us to conduct this important work.

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